John Deere Days

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By Douglas Yunker

For more than a half a century, Deere and Company's marketers have been conducting local meetings for farm customers and prospects. The use of motion pictures has been a key element in selling both farm implements and a life style. Ironically, the success of Deere coincided with the end of the fact and myth of the pioneer farmer.

As America, that primitive, undefiled nature glorifying the pure Rousseauian idea of the pioneer, moved westward, the grasslands succumbed to the plow. The advance of the pioneer, the Romantic Movement's Child, was halted by the true prairie, a treeless grassland that widened like a wedge from Western Ohio across Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. Though rich, the prairie sod was so entangled with tough grass roots that it discouraged cultivation until the development and dissemination of John Deere's self-scouring steel plow. Though Child of the Romantic Movement, the pioneer belonged to the perfectionists, and so this early era of farming was one of controlling and improving nature through dramatic growth in agricultural methods and machinery development. This was the period during which the company founded by John Deere, a blacksmith/inventor/businessman, grew from a small blacksmith shop in Grand Detour, Illinois, to a multi-national farm machinery company with headquarters in Moline, Illinois . . . from the development

of John Deere's first plow in 1837 to the Company's entry into the tractor business in 1918.

The Farm Meetings

1920's

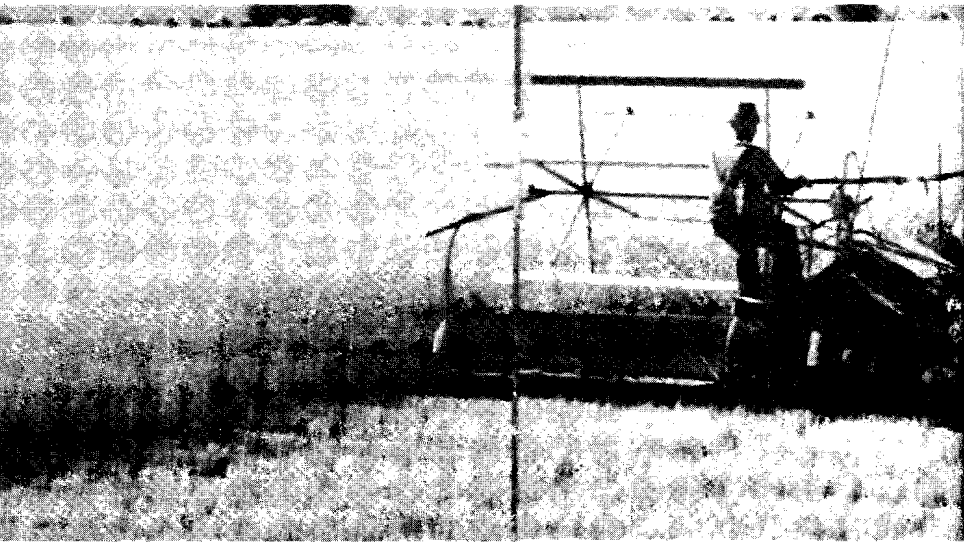
Though the farmer maintained a self-image of seeker of inner grace and debaser of the old materialistic values of settled culture, he searched for power over the land. By the 1920's, the pioneer, now farmer, was purchasing all the plows, planters, and wagons that Deere could produce. The common denominator among these machines was they they were powered by horse. This pioneer seeker-of-power learned via the inventor/businessman, that a typical draft horse delivered only about ¾ of a horsepower, and that there were limits on how many horses could be hitched to any given farm machine. By 1920, U.S. farmers owned about 158,000 tractors. Still, the impact of tractors on the agriculture of the early 1920's was minor. A survey counted tractors on only 6% of farms in six corn belt states. Not until the latter 1920's, when manufacturers started introducting 2 and 3 plow general purpose tractors did the Tractor Age begin, with tractor power becoming practical for the typical farmer with a quarter section of land.

"Desiring" to help the farmer move into the tractor era, Deere & Company sponsored a "service school" as early as 1922-23. Held in the implement dealer's store, these programs provided trained lecturers who used slides and charts to teach any tractor owner how to

Front mounted rigs made cultivating easier.

service the early tractors. The crowds at that time were limited to owners or potential owners. Often the program would include some general farming information provided by the County Extension Agent. Common in the rural areas, this concept of "service school" was easily incorporated by the farmer into the already accepted concept of meetings with the Agriculture Extension Service Agent who had been holding "Ag school" since the Smith-Lever Act of 1914.

"The Good Old Days," a term the puritan pioneer-turned-businessman would long afterward call the period from 1900-World War I, found prices of farm products and of farm land rising steadily. Much later, economists were to describe 1910-1914 as the base period for figuring out something called "parity." During World War I, farm product prices went up under the pressure of war demand. Farm land prices were inflated. Farmers worried over shortage of farm help and over war-time regulations. The goal was high production. However, by 1920 farm prices had dropped 85% and farm income dropped



The binder, with its slow reel and canvas conveyor, was designed to handle grain gently to avoid threshing prematurely.

sharply in 1921. Production—geared to war deamnd—stayed high. Mortgages were foreclosed on a big scale. By 1924, farm income leveled out lower than non-farm income. Farmers noted that everybody else seemed to be prosperous as the stock market rose by leaps and bounds. Iowa's Hoover built a Federal Farm Board encouraging cooperation and providing funds that could be used to take surplus crops off the market until better times. Farmers kept production high.

Realizing that high production increased income, the farmers sought to mechanize their farming. Deere's "service schools" had

proven so successful as a tool to help sell tractors that they were gradually expanded and new elements were added, including silent movies. In 1926 the first black and white silent film, "Four Sons," was produced. In this film an elderly couple celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary; and their four sons returned from California, Alabama, Canada, and an Eastern state. The film depicted farming in each part of the country, especially demonstrating Deere equipment in various farming operations.

1930's—1940's

Folks called the early 1930's the time of the "Great Depression." In the country, farmers burned corn because it was cheaper than coal; yet farmers increased production despite low market prices and kept the economy going. Many farmers had doubts about what "that Easterner, Roosevelt, with a Harvard accent" could do for agriculture. They felt more hopeful after Henry A. Wallace of Iowa was named

Secretary of Agriculture. Although farm income doubled from 1932 to 1938, in 1941, 40% of all farm mortgages were in the hands of Federal agencies.

The start of World War II in 1939, made farm surplus valuable again. Once more the farm problem was how to raise enough. Farm labor was scarce; equipment was in short supply. Farmers and their families worked long hours and patched up machinery with scraps from the junk pile. When the war ended, there was a burst of good prices while consumers—hungry for red meat—gobbled up every-

thing in sight. Farmers produced until a surplus was established, then lower prices developed again. By 1932, when the farm income improved, tractor schools were being referred to as "John Deere Days," a name that was continued for over 35 years. During these years they became a long-anticipated event every winter in many farming communities.

The Entertainment

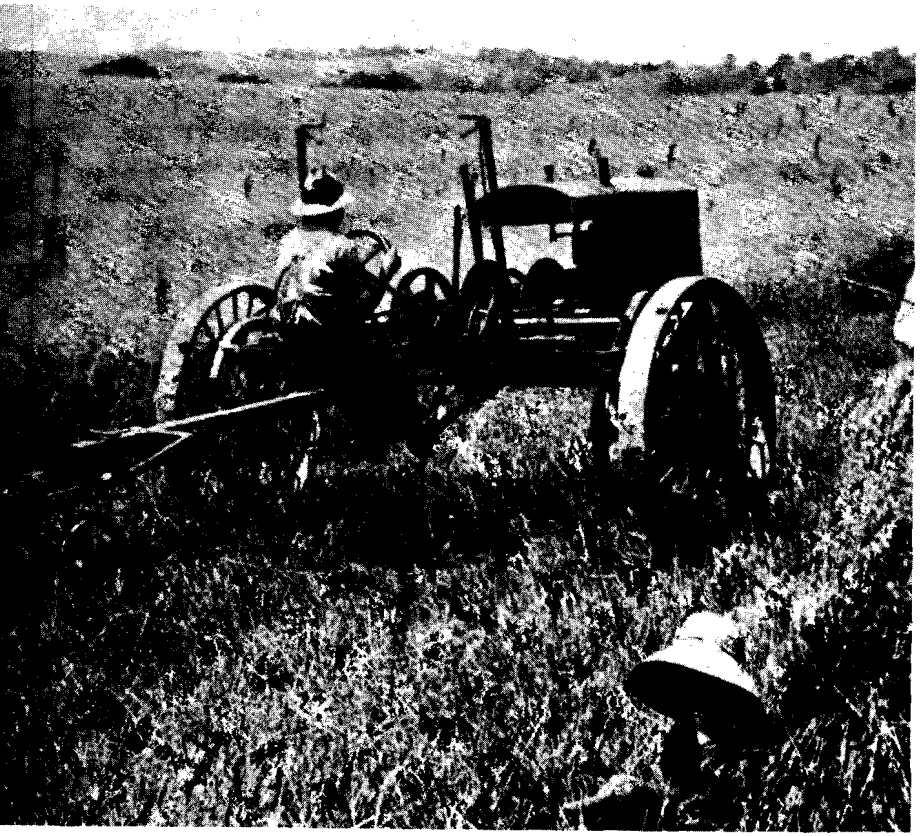
According to Mr. Glen Rohrbach, "grandfather" of Deere's farmer meetings and film program, it was 1937 that marked the real beginning of motion pictures as a focal element in Deere Days. That was the year Deere was to celebrate its Centennial Year, and Glen Rohrbach had been assigned the responsibility of preparing copy for the centennial promotion. Part of the program was to be a film telling the story of how a young blacksmith, Mr. Deere, had migrated to Illinois from Vermont and designed the first steel plow. Not satis-

Combines did not widely replace tractor-drawn binders until the 1940s.

fied with the storyline written by film producers, Rohrbach took the first big step in movie-making by writing, and then producing, "The Blacksmith's Gift."

That film proved most successful in farmer meetings. It marked the first major change in the Deere Days program. Up to that point the programs had been tailored specifically for the farmer and his sons; but, beginning in 1937, the content was broadened to appeal to the entire family.

During the 30's and 40's, Deere and Company produced the entertainment films as well as commercial materials. The Sales Branches purchased the film prints and employed a crew to run the film. The local dealers provided for all local costs. On Deere Day, a holiday atmosphere prevailed in many communities; in some, the other places of business in town closed for the day. Nearly everyone turned out for the movies and free lunch at the Deere dealership. There were even special sales days in some communities which in-



cluded tractor parades, dances, and door prizes. The entertainment films were one of the keys to drawing attendance; but, in addition, a series of films featuring new Deere products were produced and shown. The Deere Day payoff for the local dealer was the registration card. Mid-program, persons in attendance signed their name and address and indicated which Deere equipment interested them. Through initiation of the registration process, Deere learned that wives and children influenced the farmers' purchases. From these cards a mailing list for promotional material was developed as well as prospect lists which were used by the dealer in making sales visits.

In the height of Deere Days, about 102 shows a day were presented in Canada and the U.S. from November through March. In one Missouri town, 3000 people attended Deere Days at three local theaters, with crews bicycling films between the theaters. Lunch and baskets of groceries were given away as Deere got their product messages across, and the farmers loved it.

With the war years of the 1940's, movie film was in short supply and Deere's marketing management decided to cancel the annual events; but, when resumed following the war, these dealer events set new attendance records. Over 1.7 million people registered at Deere Days that year—1947. The basic structure of the program was the same as pre-war, except the movies had the added feature of being in color.

In addition to films showing the latest inventions which would increase production with few man hours, Deere & Company developed the "message" film and the "entertainment" movie. Ranging from 35 minutes to about an hour in length, these films proved to be big attendance getters for Deere Days.

The formula for a successful film seems to have been built upon a quote attributed to that romantic, scholar, artist, statesman and agriculturalist, Thomas Jefferson; "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." The films were absolutely virtuous; in fact, the Catholic Church recommended the Deere library of films as the only source of films without questionable material.

Combining entertainment with education and sales, Glen Rohrbach wrote a series of fourteen "message" films about the Gordon Family. The leading character, Tom Gordon, was a true "pioneer cynic" who distrusted society's modern ideas and technology in such films as: "Doubting Thomas Gordon" and "It Can't Be Done." At the end of each film, Tom Gordon would "allow" that while society may be suspect, machinery and invention could be perfected. As Tom Gordon converted, so, it seems, did the farmer audience as mechanized progress took its place in their minds. Each of the ideas

turned them from the past and enabled them to speculate on the future.

Since entertainment films were a big drawing card, Rohrbach went to Hollywood for talent. Deere films were produced featuring "name" personalities such as Arthur Lake of Dagwood Bumstead fame. Gale Storm's first film experience was in a Deere film. Other films featured: Zazu Pitts, Stu Irwin, Don DeFore, and Billie Burke. Representative film titles were:

"Friendly Valley" in which city businessmen, after learning to appreciate the finer rural aspects of life, come to love and promote musical talent of rural villagers and farmers. The city slickers save the local radio station from their own city monopoly. (1938)

"The Tuttle Tugger" in which two city-slickers mistakenly exchange an electric milker and electric permanent hair wave machine. The resulting "curly cow" and "teated coiffure" are patiently accepted by the farmer and his wife since city folks could not be expected to do better. (1939)

When "Joel Gentry Goes to Hollywood" from the farm, he becomes a wholesome star (due to his "unique" ability to milk a cow), marries the starlet, and both return to the "good live" on the farm. (1942)

In Deere's 1941 production, "Melody Comes to Town," the farm community makes efforts to raise money for an injured high school football player's operation. Melody, a home-town-girl-made-good-in-the-city, brings her all-girl orchestra home for the concert. Playing to the SRO crowd, Melody tells the home folks that they are the life blood of America. As Old Glory blows in the wind, the film ends. (1941)

Giving the audience what they wanted—clean, humorous entertainment, the films promoted the idea that farm life was inherently virtuous. The personalities portrayed this familiar and popular philosophy. In the midst of each new year's improved technology (which encouraged increased production, even as the farm population gradually diminished), John Deere clearly recited interpretations of Rousseau's "Return to Nature" philosophy.

1950-1976

When John Deere invented the steel plow, the farm population was about 26% of the U.S. population. By 1920, when the tractor was introduced, the population had dropped to 12%. When John Deere Days began, one man was already doing the job that ten men had done in a prior era. By the agri-business days of the 1950's, less than 6% of the population was on the farm. During the following years another out-migration occurred which resulted in only 2% of the U.S. population living on farms by 1976.

The Romantic pioneer reality had been interred by the steel plow, but its myth had been sustained until the 1950's. Television started having a negative effect on the Deere movie program, and the farmer interest had shifted to a more business-oriented stance. With this change, the Deere Days emphasis shifted congruently with the farmer's interest to business management information. At the time of this new emphasis the name John Deere Days changed to "Farming Frontiers" . . . apparently an attempt to find a new frontier in respect to that old pioneer spirit!

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